This page contains a text extract discussing the importance of missionary work in the early Church as described in the New Testament. The text explains how Jesus sent the Apostles out to proclaim the Gospel of God and heal the sick, and how this missionary mandate was passed on to the Church. It also highlights the necessity of Christians to proclaim the Good News, emphasizing the love of Christ as the driving force behind their mission. The text contrasts the early Church's approach to missions, which involved almost every type of person, with the modern conception that only the qualified can evangelize. It concludes by emphasizing the importance of understanding the context and means by which the Good News was proclaimed in the early Church, rather than simply repeating the message today.
If people from all walks of life could be included in the missionary work of the early Church, perhaps we need to return to this kind of simplicity in the evangelization of today. It is not, and has never been, about human wisdom "for the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom" (1 Cor 1:25). Jesus himself promised that the Apostles should not worry about what to say when being interrogated, that "You will be given at that moment what you are to say" (Mt 10:19). At the same time, St. Peter exhorts Christians to, "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope" (1Pet 3:15). What is this "explanation for our hope" if not an opportunity to evangelize...a mission in itself. This is the only qualification necessary: faith in God who is our hope.

We have often heard that what a person does is rooted in who that person is, in his or her identity. This is very much the case when we look at the twelve men Jesus chose to be his witnesses. "In so naming His appointed workers [Apostles, Jesus] really defined their commission. They were not sent as theologians, or ecclesiastics, or philosophers, but as missionaries—sent ones;' messengers, witnesses of His, to tell what they had seen and heard and experienced, to declare the redemption He had wrought for them and for the whole world. This is still the true function and primary duty of every missionary, however unpopular the conception may be to some today."6 This identity as 'one who is sent' gives a fundamental framework to the rest of their lives and their missions. Yet, as baptized Christians, we too have the identity of being 'sent'. We receive the prophetic character at baptism, a character that endows us with the necessary grace to proclaim the Truth who is Christ at every moment, in season and out. We see the cost of this task in the prophets of the Old Testament, but in a particular way in the martyrs. This form of witness to Christ was and remains a powerful missionary tool. Their testimony and confession of their faith in Christ given with serene fortitude and confidence in the Lord demonstrated the authenticity of their faith rather than an attitude of rebellious defiance.

Yet martyrdom was not the only way that the early missionaries brought hearts to faith in Christ. They had to be quite creative in responding to changing needs and situations. Christians went from being more or less ignored, or peacefully coexisting with Jews and other religious cultures to violently opposed. They went from being included in Jewish prayers and liturgies in the Temple and Synagogue to gradually being excluded. Through these changing situations, the early Christian missionaries developed innovative ways of delivering the message of salvation--methods that are essential to the task of the New Evangelization today. Although the New Evangelization is to be "new in ardor, expressions, and methods,"7 the message stays the same. Just as the Christian missionaries of the New Testament were increasingly prevented from entering Jewish synagogues and so began preaching in the streets8, in the new 'methods' of today this can take the form of preaching on the radio or the means of mass communication. The same with written communications -- the written word is always powerful and can spread quickly. A letter9 that was able to reach numerous communities in the early Church can now be accessible to millions through the internet. Early Christians recognized that "direct proclamation is but one, albeit the most significant, means of evangelization in the early church," and so practiced it, there were "other, complementary modes of mission include exemplary suffering or 'good citizenship.'"10

Similarly, we are able to attribute the success of the early missionaries to several distinctive marks. Missionaries of today must also take note so that these same characteristics may be emulated within the context of the New Evangelization. Kelly writes, "the missionaries succeeded for a variety of reasons: faith, bravery, the power of their message, and so much more. But they also succeeded by respecting and being open to the culture of their converts. This enabled them to use the culture properly and effectively to get across the Christian message."11

As we begin to see the various dimensions of mission in the early Church as portrayed through the New Testament, the centrality of mission starts to come into sharper focus. Some argue that the New Testament not only encourages and places a foundation for missionary activity, but must be seen in itself "as a missionary document."12 Taking into account the context in which both the Gospels and other New Testament books were written, this seems to be a feasible conclusion. It is clear that they were not written to be a history book, with a collection of dates and names, but rather a tool to serve the spreading of God's Word. They were written by those disciples (and thus missionaries) who saw the need to leave a written account of Jesus' own words and actions for the future generations. St. Paul, as he wrote from the cities he was evangelizing, would address practical issues in order to teach people to authentically live the Gospel. He wrote in the context of mission himself. The Evangelists who were not one of the Twelve Apostles had been on mission with St. Peter or St. Paul and had come to see the need for a written account of Jesus' life and
mission. The act of writing flowed from seeing the pastoral necessities during a time of mission. St. Matthew and St. John were Apostles who had experienced mission under the direction of Jesus himself.

As can be seen, there is a great missionary impulse to even what lies in the background of the New Testament. From having been written while on mission or after having seen the realities of those receiving the proclamation of the Kingdom in the midst of mission, one can begin to gather the importance of mission for Early Christians. Evangelization was a natural consequence of having come to faith in Jesus, and so it must be again today. Christians of today must ask ourselves if we are truly living the all that Christ called us to...are we living as the Apostles themselves lived, proclaiming with our lives that “It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard,” (Acts 4:20) preferring to obey God (who had commanded them to spread the Good News) than man. Can we truly say what the Apostles Peter and John said to the lame beggar at the gate of the Temple, “I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you...the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean” (Acts 3:6). The name of Jesus and our faith in His redeeming power is our greatest treasure. Are we sharing the wealth we have received?

2 H.H. Francis, General Audience, March 27, 2013
4 Cf. John Paul II, Address to CELAM's 19th ordinary assembly, 9 March 1983.
7 Cf. John Paul II, Address to CELAM'S 19th ordinary assembly, 9 March 1983.
9 Cf. Ibid
10 Cf. Ibid

Back to Main Page of Teachings of SCTJM...